

Peasant family in Paraguay condemned by agrottoxins

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The tragedy faced by Petrona Villasboa's peasant family doesn't seem to come to an end. The family has been affected by agrototoxic contamination for more than 3 years. This time Petrona's 3 month-old grandchild is suffering from hidrocefalia. Even after 3 years of judicial battle the family is still waiting for the conviction of those responsible for the poisoning of Petrona's son.

In 2003, in the department of Itapúa, Paraguay, Silvino Talavera, then 11 years old, was fumigated with a cocktail of agrottoxins which are being used to crop Roundup Ready soybeans. The children of Petrona; Silvino, Sofia (then 13 years) and Patricia (2 years), had to be hospitalised the following days due to extreme exposure to the agrottoxins. When their condition stabilised they were able to return home, where they were then exposed to yet another fumigation from another neighbouring soy farmer. Silvino died a few days after. Traces of fenol, carbamato and glyphosate were found in his sister's blood. With the support of CONAMURI, a Paraguayan organisation of peasant and indigenous women, Petrona started a court case in 2003 to try to get justice for the murder of her son and the poisoning of her entire family.

But the Talavera Villasboa family is not only suffering from toxic exposure. During the past 3 years they have been facing threats and violence that tried to silence them. Their animals have been killed and the soy producers planted a strip of eucalyptus bordering the family's land, drying it up. In May, Petrona's brother, Serapio Villasboa, was brutally murdered, stabbed eleven times. Serapio was a member of the national peasant movement, and it is suspected that his murder was one of many committed by the Civil Guards, a repressive force under the conduct of the Ministry of Internal Affairs. The Ministry is linked to the big landowners and large scale soy producers, especially focusing to prosecute peasant leaders. In the case of Silvino Talavera Villasboa, the public prosecutor refused to continue with the case, stating that the family only wants to get compensation payments out of the murder of one of their family members.

Sofia, the oldest sister of Silvino, cooked the food Silvino was carrying on the day he got fumigated. Following that day her health started to deteriorate. In 2005 she suffered from chronic head- and stomach aches, nausea and loss of sight for 3 months. The 17 year-old Sofia gave birth last April to a child that looked healthy at birth, until his head volume began to increase after two months. The diagnose was HYDROCEPHALI, a disease which causes the accumulation of excessive cefaloraquideo liquid in the brain. For the moment the child is hospitalized in the Children's Hospital of Asunción waiting for an operation to insert a valve to remove the liquid. This disease, genetic or acquired, is considered a malformation of the central nervous system. A genetic predisposition to agrottoxins might be triggered during fetus development by environmental factors like Sofia's exposure to agrottoxins.

In Mexico, health researchers the department of Nayarit discovered a causal relationship between the exposure to pesticides and genetic malformations, especially amongst women who are being exposed to agrottoxins during the first 3 months of pregnancy. The study shows that the risk on these malformations amongst women being exposed to agrochemical products is three times higher than in a non-exposed population; including the ones who live in fumigated villages, those who live close to fields where agrottoxins are used, those who have a partner working with agrochemicals and those who wash contaminated clothes.

In Misiones, Argentina, 5 out of every 1000 children is born with meliomeningocele, a malformation of the central nervous system related to hydrocephali. The cases are more frequent in paper and tabaco producing zones, where they use agrottoxins. This problem is being transferred to the whole environment, resulting in soil degradation, air contamination and poisoning of water sources. On top of this, it is estimated that in Misiones close to 13% of the population has some form of disability, being the double of the national average.

In Chile, this problem has sprung up in the last 15 to 20 years in the industrial forest and fruit regions, leading to one of the highest rates of genetic malformations in Latin America. The Sixth Region of Chile has seen the rapid development of industrialised agriculture, with the massive use of pesticides. Preliminary work conducted in the region suggests an association between the exposure and an increase of the prevalence of genetic malformations at birth. In Rancuaga 4.1% of the incidents of genetic malformations were registered amongst newborns, 27,65% had an agricultural background linked to the use of pesticides and 19,11% of the cases show an incidence of exposure caused by the location of the house.

Dr. Martin of the University of Passo Fundo in Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil, realised a study on the cases of newborns whose mothers have been exposed directly to agrottoxins; finding that 38% of the malformations were neurological, of which the biggest amount corresponds to hydrocephali (44%) amongst other types like mielomenigecele, microcefalia, spina bifida and anencefalia. Soy monocultures stands out for the high incidence of malformations and neurological problems, 78% of the cases correspond to this type of monoculture while 22% is attributed to the cultivation of wheat.

The studies presented above are just a small fraction of all the studies that show the devastating impact of agrottoxins on health. In the hospitals of Asunción in Paraguay, cases of children with malformation, tumours, leukemia and respiratory

problems are increasing. In the Children's Hospital, next to the grandchild of Petrona, lies another baby with hydrocephali. The child, called Ruben, is in a very critical state after 4 operations that didn't improve its condition. The baby comes from the area around Capiata where in 2004, agrottoxins were spilled by a passing truck. A truck that was illegally transporting more than 20 thousand litres of agrottoxins (Metadof, Duron, Novafate and Novaquat) turned over and caused a spill that reached a stream and the Ypacarai lake. Thirty people were hospitalized after the accident. Six other babies were born with anencefalia (no brain) during the first months of 2006 in the community of Pirapo'i in Itapúa 100 km from Encarnacin. 57 families live in this community, of which 17 live surrounded by soy, wheat and sunflower monocultures. Three of the cases of anencefalia were from these 17 families. Health personnel from this area told the press that the majority of the cases are diarrhoea, vomiting, and skin problems such as allergies, stains and boils. The Minister of Health publically denied that the cases could be attributed to agricultural fumigation, and presented the press a report by Dr. Cardozo, the person responsible for running blood tests on the affected population. But this report has never been signed by Dr. Cardozo. Meanwhile, Dr. Carrillo, from the Instituto Privado del Niño, irresponsibly suggested that what they were seeing was a generalized case of folic acid deficiency. Encarnación is commonly described as the illegal cementary for agrottoxins in Paraguay. Two illegal dumps were discovered there in February 2005. The first one included 80 drums of highly toxic insecticide, and the second one was full of empty herbicide and fungicide containers 20 kilometres from the capital.

It looks as though, on top of the poverty caused by soy expansion in Paraguayan peasant communities, a wave of diseases is also threatening to kill them. The government keeps their eyes closed to this genocide, denying the connection between these incidents and the use of agrottoxins. Apparently soy is too big a business in Paraguay for the government to attack it. The price tag of 6% of Paraguay's GDP seems to make the government blind to the fact that 20 litres of glyphosate is being used for every hectare of transgenic soy. And glyphosate is used with even stronger agrochemicals like endosulfan, paraquat and even DDT. The more the private sector of agribusiness gains, the less budget there is for health. Paraguay is investing in the Hidrovia, a large scale infrastructure project, to facilitate the export of soy. The country is indebted and the only proposed solution to tackle the country's poverty is the World Bank's program of Swapt Debt for Health and Nature, which distributes USAID money through local NGOs. It seems that incapacity, lack of vision and impunity are the dominating characteristics of this government, which is willing to sacrifice its people to maintain the agro-export model.

The nephew of Silvino Talavera, like many newborns in Paraguay, is born with a malformation which will affect the rest of his life. His entire family has to face chronic health problems caused by agrottoxins like stomach aches, allergies, respiratory difficulty and hormonal deregulations. The soy producers responsible for the murder of the child, Herman Schelender and Alfredo Laustenlager, are still free after 3 years of juridical struggle. The case is struck in the Paraguayan Supreme Court, right where the soy lobby wants it. Unperturbed, they keep on producing transgenic soy, fumigating peasant communities and causing disease and the devastation of future generations.

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